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ABSTRACT

This paper notes that, for adolescents, moving involves the loss of friends, school and the familiar things that make up everyday life. It focuses on the role of the school in the relocation process. The types of problems adolescents experience as a result of family relocation are explored, along with ideas and suggestions about what might be offered by schools to facilitate transfer student adjustment. A literature review reveals that mobility is an issue that school personnel should both recognize and address. The review consists of three major sections: (1) problems associated with relocation; (2) factors influencing adaptation; and (3) how school counselors can help. A section on school practices for newcomers lists 13 ways that school counselors can become involved early with students transferring into their schools, before obvious problems with coping are apparent. A section on school practices for students leaving the school provides six suggestions that counselors may use to help the student prepare for a move. It is concluded that, by incorporating services and resources for relocated students into their comprehensive developmental school guidance plan, counselors can provide a structure in which students, parents, and teachers can work together to make relocation a positive learning experience. (NB)

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Adolescents On the Move:

Providing For Relocated Students

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Abstract

For adolescents, moving involves the loss of friends, school, and the familiar things that make up everyday life. This paper focuses on the role of the school in the relocation process. A review of literature reveals that mobility is an issue that school personnel should recognize and address. This paper explores the types of problems adolescents experience as a result of family relocation, along with ideas and suggestions about what might be offered by schools to facilitate adjustment.

Adolescents on the Move:

Providing for Relocated Students

Moving from one place to another has become a way of life in American society. One out of every five families makes a move requiring a change of residence. Such relocation affects some eight million school-age children. There are over 1.6 children in armed services families (U.S. Department of Defense, 1980), many of whom change schools 6 times during the elementary and secondary school years (Hausman & Reed, 1991; Holland-Jacobsen, Holland & Cook, 1984; Marchant, & Medway 1983). Allan and Bardsley (1983) defined "transient" as those children who have moved to a new community and a new school, particularly those children who make repeated moves throughout their school years. However, in some cases, just one move can be traumatic.

Reactions to relocation vary from individual to individual, and adjustment to moving occurs along a broad continuum. Some people make the transition smoothly, while others find the change of relocation to be a stressful event. Hausman and Reed (1991) described relocation as a traumatic or crisis event. They defined "crisis" as "a time-limited state in which an individual faces a novel, problematic situation in which her or his coping skills are ineffective" (p. 248). In a crisis,"individuals may experience anxiety, confusion, and feelings of helplessness; their

sense of well-being is disrupted" (p. 248).

Adolescents who move are faced with a double stress: the adaptation to a new environment and the pressures of adolescent development (Holland-Jacobsen et al., 1984). Many times, the move is harder for teens than children, since friends are so important to adolescents. One of the main jobs of teens is to become independent of the family, and relying on friends is one way to help make the break (Arbetter, 1991). It is easier to psychologically separate from the family when the family is stable and predictable. When the family is going through many changes, it is harder for the teenager to establish a separate identity. Finally, adolescents are trying to gain control over their life, and moving is a major life change that is beyond their control (Arbetter, 1991).

It is generally the parent(s) who it is assumed will help the child deal with the stress associated with relocation; yet, the school is second only to the family as the most important social setting for a young person. Usually, the acceptance of a newcomer to a school is the most crucial, immediate challenge for youth in transition. Because the school is often the first place the youth learns the standards and the values of the new community, the role of the school and the extent to which the school staff facilitates integration of the new student can be a major factor in the adjustment process (Cornille, Bayer, & Smyth, 1983).

Despite the increasing numbers of relocated students, the consequences of geographic mobility on the social and emotional development of children have been examined only to a very limited extent (Cornille et al., 1983). The role of the school in facilitating the adjustment to a new community has been explored only briefly, with little special regard to services that might be offered. "Except for special programs for the children of migrant workers, most schools have no formal programs to assist children who move into the district" (Bracey, 1991, p. 713). Special attention for a child leaving the school is also virtually nonexistent (Bracey, 1991).

Mobility is an issue that school counselors must recognize and respond to (Holland-Jacobsen et al., 1984). All schools need to develop procedures for integrating relocated children. Some schools, however, are more affected than others: those around military or naval bases, prisons, and areas with migratory workers, and those with poor socioeconomic conditions (Allan, & Bardsley, 1983). "The impact of a geographical move on the life of a student should be an important consideration for all school counselors, as they plan their developmental guidance programs" (Strother & Harvill, 1986, p. 144). By having an adequate familiarity with literature and awareness of the problems associated with mobility, the counselor can be a facilitator between the adolescent, the parent and the teacher in helping the student adjust to

his or her new surroundings (Holland-Jacobsen et al., 1984).

This paper examines the problems adolescents may experience when they transfer to a new school, the factors that may influence the ease or difficulty with which students adapt to relocating, and special programs that might be offered by schools to assist these young people to more successfully make that transfer.

Review of Literature

Problems Associated with Relocation

During a relocation, individuals must adjust to a new situation, and they may or may not feel prepared to do this. They are suddenly faced with a number of "unknowns" in the form of new people, new surroundings and new social demands (Holland-Jacobsen et al., 1984). "Everytime a child moves from one school environment to another, life and learning are disrupted" (Carlile, 1990, p. 16). Several authors (Marchant & Medway, 1984; Cornille et al., 1983; & Holland-Jacobsen et al., 1984) have discussed the stresses facing relocated school-age children, such as making friends, adjusting to new school settings, and coping with the fear and grief of leaving familiar surroundings and friends. School counselors also need to be aware of the feelings of loss and grief for friends who are left behind. Lane and Dickey (1988) proposed that the experience of moving compares with the experience of death and grief. When moving is a consequence of a separation and/or

divorce in the family, these feeling may be intensified (Newman, 1988). Strother and Harvill (1986) found that adolescents seem to experience the most difficulty with the loss of valued peer relationships. To adolescents, their circle of friends is the most important support system available to them. Adolescents may also experience feelings related to loss of control in their lives. Adolescence is a period when young people strive for autonomy. If they are forced to change communities and schools at this significant time, they may feel this new found freedom has been taken away. Adjusting to a new environment takes priority over their need to be independent.

Adolescents often encounter academic difficulty when they move to a new school. Adjustment to a new school not only includes finding classes, lockers and buses, but also becoming adjusted to new teachers and oriented to new and different academic expectations and programs. Variations in academic programs in middle and high school programs around the country have substantial impact on the adjustment process (Cornille et al., 1983). Cornille, Bayer & Smyth indicated that adjustment is often complicated by difficulty in procuring academic records from the previous school.

Given the social and academic issues of newcomers, the estimated adjustment period for the "average" newcomer was less than one might expect. Results from a study conducted by Cornille, Bayer &

Smyth (1983) indicated the median length of the adjustment period to be 23 days for peer relationships; for academic adjustment, it was 17 days. "It may be that the relatively brief, estimated adjustment period is a consequence of initially inquiring about the 'average' child" (p. 233).

Most adolescents successfully deal with relocation after a brief period of stress and disorganization. Some children develop new skills and talents when the family moves, and others associate the relocation with other disruptions in their life and they lag behind their contemporaries as a result (Cornille et al., 1983).

Factors Influencing Adaptation

For successful adaptation of the interschool transfer of a child to a new community, the following three tasks must be resolved:

1. The child must find an acceptable place among her or his own peers.
2. The child must be able to meet the academic and behavioral standards for his or her grade level in school.
3. The child must be accepted by the teacher as an appropriate member of the assigned class (Holland-Jacobsen et al., 1984, pp. 49-50).

Moving is a stressful event which can cause problems, depending on how it is handled. Some adolescents seem to have an easier time

with moving than others. Several factors influence the ease or difficulty with which adolescents adapt to a move. Early research (cited in Donahue & Gullotta, 1983) on relocation was used to document a link between mobility and social or psychiatric problems. More recent work has attempted to examine relocation stress taking into account aspects of family composition, sex differences, the number of previous moves and the meaning given to the move by the family (Donahue & Gullotta, 1983).

Results of a study done by Donahue & Gullotta (1983) indicated that there are no links between the adaptation process and number of moves made by the family. The authors propose that this may be due to a "survivor effect" ; those who do not cope well do not continue to move. Those who do continue to move may be better at it, enjoy it more or at least become more resigned to it than others.

Donahue and Gullotta (1983) also found that overall, girls and young women tend to have an easier time with the transition than boys and young men. Boys are seen as missing friends more and girls are more involved in joining clubs and making friends. It is suggested that the smoother, happier move that females make is a result of having more coping skills available to them than do males.

Cornille et al. (1983) identified individual characteristics of an adolescent who might have the most difficulty adjusting to a new school. The list runs from personal obstacles to broad-based cultural and social

problems. Included are those students who are big or small for their age, have a physical handicap, are older or younger than their classmates, and those students with a poor self-concept. In addition, students from families undergoing a major economic change, students with academic exceptionalities, newcomers brighter or slower than the normal school population, and those not well-prepared for the new school's standards may experience adjustment difficulties. Finally, adolescents from groups culturally different than that of the student body of the school may have greater challenges in their adjustment process. Changes within the family, such as divorce, separation, long distance marriages, death of a family member, new sibling, and stepfamilies that result in a move can also create special needs for the young man or woman. If these perceptions are accurate, there are invariably many adolescents who bring with them individual issues that will need extra support if they are to successfully adapt to a new school.

How School Counselors Can Help

The National Education Association stated in a 1980 position paper that mobility itself is not the problem. The problem is that the schools are not prepared to deal with mobility. All schools today need to develop procedures for integrating the relocated child into the school population (Newman, 1988).

According to Cornille et al. (1983), the primary goal of schools is to provide optimal educational services and learning conditions to the students. This requirement, more than the individual needs of the transfer student, seems to determine the degree to which schools provide services to new students (Cornille et al., 1983). Most of the attention given to transfer students is aimed at meeting the basic requirements of the school, such as academics and schedules, and becoming acquainted with the physical surroundings. Although these considerations are important, it seems even more essential that students get support in coping with the fears and losses related to the move (Strother & Harvill, 1986).

As previously stated, mobility usually has a disruptive impact. Regardless of whether a move has positive or negative long-term effects, the adolescent needs guidance and direction to ease the immediate adjustment. The school counselor can be a chief catalyst in the adjustment process. Counselors familiar with the effects of mobility on young people will be better able to meet the needs of incoming students. The counselors should also take the responsibility of sharing knowledge about how to ease the transition with teachers and parents. Teachers should be trained in ways to deal with a mobile student population. The counselor can give parents information about decisions to make regarding future moves, and can answer questions parents or

teachers may have when enrolling students (Holland-Jacobsen et al., 1984).

It is important for counselors to realize that each individual and family responds differently to a move. Some may be helped by providing information; others will benefit from proactive counseling that helps families develop realistic expectations about a move. Individual strengths and coping strategies can be identified (Hausman & Reed, 1991). "In all that counselors think and do about working with new students, the key point is for them to get involved; to intercede in the lives of these young people to help make their adjustment to a new school as smooth as possible" (Lane & Dickey, 1988, p. 362).

School Practices for Assisting Newcomers

The school counselor often has little contact with transfer students unless they have obvious problems with coping. It is suggested that early involvement by counselors might be preventative. This involvement may include:

1. Providing inservice education for teachers on how to facilitate adaptation to a new school.

2. Arranging special tutoring "catch-up" sessions at the beginning of the year and throughout the year.

3. Setting up a buddy system with trained peer hosts. Some

schools have formed a "Welcoming Club" of students solely for this purpose. Often ex-newcomers are especially valuable members.

4. Provide packets of materials for prospective students. These packets may include school personnel profiles, a student handbook, a school map or any other information that may be helpful.

5. Make copies of a recent school yearbook available for students to borrow. A folder of newspaper clippings about school-related activities will help the newcomer become familiar with the new school.

6. In large schools where the numbers of students have moved in a "How is it going?" social can be hosted by the student council.

7. Plan a banana-split party or other special treat during the lunch hour or during homeroom period, for the purpose of introducing newcomers to each other, and welcoming them to the school.

8. When the number of newcomers is few, counselors may schedule a second interview with a student after the first week or ten days. This second meeting allows the counselor to gather information about how well the new student is adjusting academically and socially. Many students find second and third weeks the hardest, and contact with the counselor can help during this phase.

9. Sponsor dances at which new students are guests.

10. Provide an evening "Open House" exclusively for new students, their parents, and their brothers and sisters.

11. Send the parents a letter welcoming them to the school and community.

12. Run columns in the school newsletter listing newcomers, their addresses (if they want it published), where they came from, and a brief sketch of their interests.

13. Finally, relocated students may be suffering from a feeling of grief and loss that they cannot relate to any specific aspect of their move. They just feel bad. Through a well-planned group experience, the school counselor can help students' explore these feelings and find ways to overcome them. Peer interaction in the group process can facilitate this exploration through mutual sharing of feelings about the relocation (Cornille et al., 1983; Lane & Dickey, 1988; Newman, 1988; Strother & Harvill, 1986).

"Counselors need not be fearful of failure in trying new ideas to help students who are new to their schools. For counselors, not trying is, in effect, telling those students that they are indeed not wanted" (Lane & Dickey, 1988, p. 362).

School Practices for Students Leaving

Assisting a student through the transition process includes helping him or her prepare for a move, when possible. Programs for leavers may include:

1. A report to the parents on the adolescent's areas of strength and weakness, and the procedure for forwarding records to the new school, when known.

2. Discussion of the move with the student.

3. Provide mementos, like a school shirt or special certificate, as a going-away gift.

4. Inform teachers of impending move. Teachers can develop teaching activities to incorporate the move, such as a geography unit on the city or region to which the student is going.

5. Make contact with the new school. Write or make a phone call or put together a packet to send with the student to the new school. Copies of school records for students to carry facilitates placement.

6. Set up programs that provide structured time for those moving away to discuss their apprehensions with other students who will be moving, or those who moved to the school the previous year (Cornille et al.,1983; Newman, 1988).

Many of the programs suggested can be implemented by other members of the schools community: teachers, parent groups, or the student body. Through preplanned services, the negative consequences of a relocation can be reduced, and new school experiences can be more positive experiences for the young newcomer (Cornille et al., 1983).

Conclusions

It appears that mobility will continue at a high rate, and although mobility may not be the direct cause of poor achievement or adjustment, it is a complicating factor for a young man or woman who has other at-risk characteristics. Schools may not be able to correct for socioeconomic factors, or for a wide variety of other conditions that cause an adolescent to move. However, schools can influence many aspects of an adolescent's school experience, including achievement and adjustment for those students who are negatively affected by moving.

The school counselor is in a perfect position to help ease the transition of the relocated adolescent and reduce the adverse effects. By incorporating services and resources for relocated students into their comprehensive developmental school guidance plan, counselors will provide a structure in which students, parents, and teachers can work cooperatively toward making relocation a positive learning experience.

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